Avetis Sultanzadeh and the Problem of "a Class That Had Not Yet Been Formed"

A Critique of Avetis Sultanzadeh's Analysis of Iranian Social Structure and the Role of the Working Class: From Iranian Migrant Workers in the Caucasus to the Oil Workers of Southern Iran

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Avetis Sultanzadeh was among the first to attempt to analyze Iranian society and economy not merely descriptively, but within a Marxist theoretical framework. The importance of his book The Economic Development of Persia and British Imperialism and his other writings cannot be ignored. He gathered extensive information on landownership, landlord-peasant relations, foreign trade, the penetration of foreign capital, industrial backwardness, the roles of Britain and Russia, and the emergence of the earliest workers' organizations. In several instances, he noticed issues that many of his contemporaries did not see at all.[1]

Yet precisely at the point where Sultanzadeh moves from describing Iranian society to drawing political conclusions about the force that would drive the coming revolution, one of the most important problems in his theory becomes visible. At times, he appears to have generalized the experience of the Iranian migrant proletariat in the Caucasus—especially the workers of Baku—to the working class inside Iran. Although both groups were Iranian, they were products of two different social and economic environments. This distinction may provide the key to understanding one of Sultanzadeh's most fundamental theoretical errors.

Before proceeding, one clarification of names is also necessary: Avetis Sultanzadeh was the political name of Avetis Mikaelian and he should not be confused with Ardeshir Avanesian, a cadre of a later generation of the Communist Party and subsequently the Tudeh Party. Sultanzadeh was born around 1890 in Maragheh, was active in the Bolshevik movement and the Comintern, and played a role in founding the Communist Party of Iran.[2]

If we are to speak of the earliest serious efforts to develop a Marxist theory of the structure of Iranian society, Sultanzadeh occupies a highly prominent place. Afshin Shams Ghahfarokhi, in his reassessment of early Marxist writings on Iran, likewise regards Sultanzadeh's analysis of agrarian structure as one of the first serious and relatively independent attempts to understand Iran's mode of production and class relations.[3]

Sultanzadeh Should Not Be Regarded Merely as an Imitator of Russian Marxism

A critique of Sultanzadeh is more credible when it first acknowledges the strengths of his work. Unlike many later party writings, he did not simply impose a handful of terms borrowed from Marx and Lenin upon Iranian reality. In examining the agrarian question, he considered various forms of ownership, religious endowments, state and private estates, methods of exploitation, taxation, forced labor, and landlord-peasant relations.[1][3] Ghahfarokhi also emphasizes that Sultanzadeh's description of agrarian relations in Iran, despite his use of terms such as "feudal," often begins from Iran's concrete realities and recognizes the differences between Iran and European feudalism.[3]

Sultanzadeh himself also understood that industrial capitalism in Iran was extremely weak. In the chapter dealing with the "development of capitalism," he discusses the small number of factories, the weakness of the domestic market, the backwardness of agriculture, the predominance of merchant capital, and the limitations of modern industry.[1] It is therefore simplistic to claim that "Sultanzadeh did not know Iranian reality." The more precise problem is that he correctly perceived many realities, but at times drew political conclusions from them that went beyond his own evidence. In other words, there was a tension between Sultanzadeh the economist and researcher, and Sultanzadeh the revolutionary and Comintern activist.

The Central Contradiction: A Small Proletariat, but a Great Historical Mission

In Sultanzadeh's theses and political writings, workers and peasants were expected, within a relatively short period, to pass through the national revolution and enter the stage of social revolution. He described conditions in which the workers of the East, after seizing power, would resolve the agrarian question, socialize large-scale production, and establish a workers' state.[2]

Yet the social subject required to carry out such a program had not yet developed sufficiently in Iran. More interestingly, Sultanzadeh himself later came to recognize this problem to some extent. Cosroe Chaqueri shows that by late 1920 he spoke of the "almost complete absence of a class-conscious proletarian element" in countries such as Iran and concluded that communists would therefore have to rely on petty-bourgeois strata as well.[4] This theoretical retreat is significant because it shows that Sultanzadeh himself had become aware of the gap between theory and Iran's actual social structure.[4]

The question nevertheless remains: why did he initially overestimate the political capacity of the Iranian working class? Part of the answer should be sought in his personal and political experience and in the environment in which he encountered the "Iranian worker."

Two Different "Iranian Working Classes"

At the beginning of the twentieth century, whenever one speaks of the "Iranian worker," one must immediately ask: the Iranian worker where? The Iranian worker in Baku and the Caucasus was not the same social phenomenon as the worker living in Tehran, Tabriz, Rasht, Isfahan, Kerman, or Khuzestan.

According to official records, around 62,000 Iranians were working in Russia in 1905, and by 1913 the number of registered Iranian workers in the Caucasus alone had reached 81,971; the true number was probably higher than the registered figure.[5] This indicates that on the eve of the Russian Revolution, a working population of tens of thousands of Iranians was living in an environment far more industrialized and politicized than Iran itself.

In the city of Baku itself, the number of Iranian subjects rose from 9,426 in 1897 to 11,132 in 1903 and 25,096 in 1913.[6] These figures did not consist solely of oil workers; they included all Iranian subjects residing in Baku. Nevertheless, employment statistics show that the Iranian presence in the oil industry was substantial. In 1913, 11,508 "Iranian" workers were registered in Baku's oil-extraction sector alone.[6]

Encyclopaedia Iranica sources also show that Iranians' share of the Baku oil labor force rose from about 11 percent in 1893 to 29.1 percent in 1915, when they constituted the largest single national group in the Baku oil industry's workforce.[7] Similar patterns could be seen elsewhere in the Caucasus. For example, during the 1906 strike at the Alaverdi copper mines and plants in Armenia, about 2,500 Iranian Azerbaijanis formed the core of the strikers.[7]

This was no longer merely a traditional and dispersed labor force. These workers confronted factories, mines, the oil industry, wages, working hours, dismissal, strikes, the Tsarist police, unions, and Social

Democratic parties in their everyday lives. Baku was not merely a place of employment; it was a political school.

Baku Was Not Merely a Workplace; It Was a Political School

The Iranian migrant worker in the Caucasus had not only become a wage laborer; he also lived in one of the most politically charged working-class environments of the period. Baku was a center of activity for Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Armenian Social Democrats, Azerbaijani revolutionaries, and workers' networks. Strikes, demonstrations, and socialist literature had become part of the city's everyday experience.

Cosroe Chaqueri writes that the Iranian communist movement was rooted primarily among Iranian migrant workers in the Baku oil fields. The Edalat (Justice) Party also emerged in this environment and, after the Russian Revolution, began recruiting Iranian workers and other migrants.[4] Estimates of Edalat's membership have ranged from 6,000 to 10,000, but Chaqueri, considering the actual scope of the party's activity, believes the real number was probably closer to 2,000.[4]

Thus, when Sultanzadeh spoke of the "Iranian worker," the model he knew was an Iranian worker politicized in Baku, Tiflis, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. But that model did not represent the entire working class inside Iran.

Workers Existed Inside Iran, but the "Modern Proletariat" Was Still Limited

Wage workers also existed inside Iran, and trade-union activity had begun during the Constitutional Revolution. Thus, although the number of workers was growing, one must distinguish among the "worker," the wage-earning artisan, the bazaar apprentice, the workshop laborer, and the modern, concentrated industrial proletariat.

Documents collected on the labor movement of the early 1920s refer to approximately 20,000 organized workers. In the same documentary collection, a report by Dehqan/Dehgan estimates the total number of "industrialized workers" in four major centers at roughly 105,000: about 50,000 in Tehran, 30,000 in Tabriz, 15,000 in Rasht, and 10,000 in Anzali.[8] These numbers should be understood as estimates by labor and political activists of the period, not as statistical census data in the modern sense.

More important than the number itself was the composition of this labor force. A more recent study of the convergence between guilds, craftsmen, and the labor movement shows that of approximately 8,000 members of the Tehran Council of Trade Unions in the early 1920s, around 7,450 came from craft and guild backgrounds.[9] Bakers, tailors, shoemakers, bazaar apprentices, printing workers, and some service employees made up a large part of organized labor.

Sultanzadeh's problem, therefore, was not that he had invented "imaginary workers." Workers certainly existed. The error lay in treating the existence of wage laborers—and even the existence of unions—as equivalent to the formation of an independent industrial working class with a shared consciousness and the capacity to lead a revolution.

Baku and Tehran Were Two Different Class Environments

The Iranian worker in Baku labored in a large and concentrated industry: hundreds or thousands of workers in a single industrial complex confronted the same employer, defined working hours, factory discipline, and common wage issues. By contrast, in Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz, a large proportion of those called "workers" were employed in small units, bazaars, workshops, printing houses, bakeries, tailoring shops, or semi-craft occupations.

The Baku worker encountered Russian Social Democrats, Bolsheviks, and general strikes; the Tehran worker might simultaneously remain embedded in networks of neighborhood, guild, bazaar, religion, and master-apprentice relations.

From this perspective, one may say that Sultanzadeh was to some extent caught in a kind of "geographical transfer of the revolutionary subject": characteristics of an Iranian proletariat formed within the industrial and revolutionary environment of the Caucasus were generalized to a society whose own industrial proletariat was still in the early stages of formation. This was not merely a statistical error; it was a sociological one.

The Oil Industry: The Strongest Evidence of This Error

The issue becomes even clearer in the case of Iran's oil industry. Sultanzadeh correctly recognized the extraordinary importance of oil and recorded the rapid growth of Iranian oil production.[1][3] But there was a serious gap between his understanding of the oil economy and his knowledge of the working-class society of southern Iran's oil fields.

Afshin Shams Ghahfarokhi notes that the field research conducted by Sultanzadeh and his associates took place mainly in northern Iran, especially Azerbaijan, and did not cover the south. As a result, Sultanzadeh lacked sufficient first-hand information about the social structure of the southern tribes and, in particular, about the process through which the oil-industry working class was taking shape.[3]

Even so, during the same period an important nucleus of the new industrial proletariat was genuinely emerging in Khuzestan. According to figures from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, in 1920 the company's total workforce was about 12,342, of whom 8,447 were Iranian. By 1925, total employment had risen to 28,905, including 15,820 Iranians.[10]

But the existence of thousands of oil workers did not in itself mean that the Communist Party had a broad base in the oil industry. Sources on the history of the Communist Party show that systematic underground communist activity among the oil workers of the south expanded mainly from the mid-1920s, led to the formation of a clandestine union in 1928, and became visible in the major strike of 1929.[4] Thus, during 1920–1922, when Sultanzadeh was formulating his early theories, the Communist Party in the southern oil industry "lacked a broad and consolidated base."

The strike by workers at the Abadan refinery in May 1929 was a turning point. Stephanie Cronin regards this strike as one of the first major industrial confrontations of Iran's new working class: a movement shaped by the workers' initial organization, but rapidly suppressed through the joint intervention of the oil company and Reza Shah's government.[11]

On this basis, one may argue that Iran's industrial working class was being formed not in 1905 or 1917, but through a longer process, especially during the 1920s and 1930s. This strengthens the possibility of a temporal error in Sultanzadeh's analysis, because at times he treated Iran's historical time as identical to that of the Caucasus.

Sultanzadeh Treated Iran's Historical Time as Identical to That of the Caucasus

The Caucasus had already experienced several decades of Tsarist industrialization, railways, mining, and oil development. In 1913 alone, 34,479 workers were registered in Baku's oil-extraction sector, of whom 11,508 were "Iranian."[6] By contrast, Sultanzadeh himself wrote in his book about the small number of factories and the youth of Iranian industry.[1]

The two societies therefore stood at different historical moments. An Iranian laborer who migrated to Baku might, within a few years, move from being a former peasant or artisan to becoming an oil worker,

trade-union member, striker, and even a member of the Edalat Party. But this transformation took place not in a village of Azerbaijan, or in Isfahan or Kerman, but in the industrial environment of the Caucasus.

Migration had changed more than the worker's place of employment; it altered his class position, organizational experience, and political consciousness as well. This point is essential to understanding Sultanzadeh: he encountered a type of Iranian worker who had passed through several stages of class formation outside Iran and then generalized some of that worker's characteristics to Iran itself.

The State Also Mattered More Than Stage Theory Assumed

Another factor that complicated Sultanzadeh's linear class analysis was the role of the state in building modern Iran. Developments under Reza Shah showed that in Iran the state was not merely a passive product or "superstructure" of class transformation. The centralized state itself became an agent in the creation of a new army, bureaucracy, railways, state industries, modern education, and a nationwide market.

Abdollahi and Rad, in their study of political development in Iran, emphasize that the path of each society must be examined on the basis of the actual composition of social forces and their relationship with the state—an approach inspired by Barrington Moore that moves away from linear and universal theories of development. Regarding the Reza Shah period, they show that the state created a centralized administrative and military apparatus and used its concentration of power resources to carry out modernization from above.[12]

This historical experience suggests that capitalism and new social classes in Iran did not necessarily emerge through the classical Western European route. The state itself could build factories, create workers, reorganize land and taxation, construct roads and railways, and indirectly alter the class composition of society. A simple model that expects first a bourgeoisie, then a proletariat, and finally an intensification of class struggle was therefore insufficient to explain Iran.

Was Sultanzadeh a More Important Theorist Than Later Generations?

Here it is necessary to distinguish between a "theorist" and a "political activist who also wrote." By "theorist," this article means someone who attempts, using historical, economic, and social evidence, to offer a relatively comprehensive model for explaining the structure of a society and the course of its transformation—not merely someone who produces theoretical writings on tactics, organization, or a specific political question.

By this demanding standard, Sultanzadeh may be regarded as one of the earliest and most serious Iranian Marxist theorists of political economy and social structure. He did not write only about party tactics or the necessity of revolution; he discussed landownership, world trade, oil, finance capital, imperialism, modes of production, classes, and the state, and on some issues he differed from prevailing Comintern positions.[2][3]

Later generations of the Iranian left were not lacking in figures who produced theoretical work, but their projects were not necessarily of the same kind as Sultanzadeh's. The Tudeh Party generated a considerable body of historical, philosophical, and political writing, and leaders such as Ardeshir Avanesian, Iraj Eskandari, and Ehsan Tabari produced theoretical works.[13] Nevertheless, a significant part of the party's official theoretical output was developed within the framework of Soviet Marxism and the conceptual language of the Eastern Bloc, and its theoretical independence was limited.

Dr. Taqi Arani, before the formation of the Tudeh Party, was also one of Iran's most important Marxist intellectuals and played a major role in transmitting and adapting scientific and philosophical Marxist debates to the Iranian context.[14] Even so, his principal project was not identical to Sultanzadeh's comprehensive project of analyzing Iran's political economy and class structure.

In the case of Ehsan Tabari as well, it is preferable to distinguish between a "party theorist" and an "independent theorist of the structure of Iranian society." Encyclopaedia Iranica counts him among the Tudeh Party's important theorists, but his works developed within the intellectual framework of official Soviet Marxism.[15] His theoretical and terminological dependence on the official Soviet tradition was very pronounced.

Jazani, Ahmadzadeh, Pouyan, and Shahram: Theorists or Strategists of Revolution?

Important theoretical works also appeared in the guerrilla movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Masoud Ahmadzadeh in Armed Struggle: Both Strategy and Tactic, Amir-Parviz Pouyan in The Necessity of Armed Struggle and the Rejection of the Theory of Survival, and Bijan Jazani in Thirty Years of Iranian History and his other writings sought to explain the relationship among dictatorship, imperialism, classes, and armed struggle. Peyman Vahabzadeh has likewise studied these writings as part of the theorization of the Fadai movement.[16]

Taqi Shahram, in his writings and internal organizational debates, also discussed the stage of revolution, imperialism, guerrilla strategy, and the ideological transformation of the Mojahedin organization. He was unquestionably an influential and controversial theoretical figure.[17]

Even so, one can distinguish between two levels. The works of Ahmadzadeh, Pouyan, Jazani, and Shahram were directed mainly toward answering the immediate problems of revolution, organization, struggle, and the selection of a political line. Even when they offered class analysis, their main objective was to determine political strategy. Sultanzadeh, by contrast, had a broader project: he sought to explain what Iranian society was, how it had been formed, how its economy functioned, and how it related to global capitalism.

Thus, if the term "theorist" is used in the narrower and more demanding sense of a theorist of social structure and political economy, Sultanzadeh can be said to have appeared more clearly as a macro-level theorist than many left-wing activists of later generations, even though, as we have seen, his theory had serious shortcomings.

What Exactly Was Sultanzadeh's Error?

His error should not be reduced to a simple statement such as "Marxism was unsuitable for Iran." Such a judgment is itself simplistic. The central problem was that Sultanzadeh did not sufficiently distinguish among three levels that needed to be kept separate: the existence of Iranian workers; the formation of an Iranian industrial working class; and the readiness of that class to assume political leadership of a revolution.

The first level unquestionably existed; the second was in the process of formation; and the third remained very limited. More importantly, some of the examples that shaped Sultanzadeh's image of a politicized Iranian proletariat were products of Russian and Caucasian industry and class struggle, not products of economic transformation inside Iran. This seemingly small distinction has major theoretical consequences.

Conclusion

Sultanzadeh should be taken seriously and criticized at the same time. He should be taken seriously because, at a time when scientific study of Iran's economic structure was extremely limited, he attempted to understand landownership, trade, agriculture, oil, foreign capital, imperialism, and social forces within a single framework.[1][3]

But he must also be criticized because a fundamental gap existed between the actual level of development of social forces inside Iran and the historical task that revolutionary theory assigned to them.

The Iranian worker in Baku was Iranian in nationality, but socially he was a product of Baku's industrial and political environment.

In the environment of large-scale industry, migration, wage struggle, trade unions, Social Democracy, and the Russian Revolution, he had become a political worker. By contrast, much of the labor force inside Iran still stood between village life, the bazaar, craft production, and nascent industry. Perhaps the most precise formulation of the critique of Sultanzadeh is therefore this: "Sultanzadeh saw the existence of a politicized Iranian proletariat in the Caucasus, but from it he prematurely inferred the existence of a politicized proletariat inside Iran."

The history of the oil industry provides a good test of this hypothesis. When Sultanzadeh was writing his theories in the early 1920s, thousands of Iranian workers were employed in the southern oil industry, but the Communist Party still lacked a broad and organized base among them. Only a few years later, through a difficult and clandestine process, an oil workers' union was formed, and the great strike of 1929 demonstrated that Iran's industrial working class was only then beginning to move from being a "labor force" to becoming a "social and political force."[4][10][11]

From this perspective, Sultanzadeh's theoretical weakness lay not in ignorance of Iran, but in setting the clock of revolution ahead of the actual clock of Iran's social transformation. Perhaps it is precisely this contradiction that continues to make the study of his works valuable after a century: on the one hand, he was one of the most serious and independent Iranian Marxists of the first generation; on the other, he offers a clear example of the danger that a revolutionary theory may correctly observe many realities of a society while misjudging the speed and direction of its transformation.

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